Am I Being Followed?: Finding the Elusive Connection between Conductor and Ensemble

by Thomas Lloyd

Editor's Note: This paper is based on a presentation given at the conference "The Preparation of Tomorrow's Conductors-V" held at the State University of New York at Buffalo in February 1995.

When a novice conductor first asks the question "Am I being followed?," the object of concern is not a feared pursuer from behind but a group of singers or instrumentalists directly in front. As the waves of sound seem to wash over the conductor like the tide, his or her ears tend to shut down in reaction to the sensory overload. The shock of this initiation usually wears off with the confidence gained from a few additional experiences in front of an ensemble. All too often, however, the conductor's development becomes stuck in a false sense of comfort. Efforts to refine baton technique or subtleties of musical phrasing prematurely may have only superficial effects, while the conductor and ensemble remain essentially disengaged from each other.

Young conductors need to discover and develop an authority that makes an ensemble want to follow. Certainly, the charisma of personality plays an important role in establishing this leadership. First, however, the basic connection between conductor and ensemble must be established through specific aspects of rehearsal technique and physical gesture. Once student conductors make that connection and find that authority, they can exercise their particular kind of personal charisma more effectively.

Three Common Types of Interaction

There are three common types of conductor/ensemble interaction. The first type is like the interaction that occurs when I take my golden retriever Jake for a run. On the first half of our jaunt, Jake pulls me along with unexpected bursts of energy as he eagerly follows his nose for adventure. On the way back, Jake jolts me to a halt frequently as he leaves his mark on every tree and post before returning home. In a similar manner conductors often follow an ensemble's momentum or inertia. An ensemble hates a vacuum of leadership, causing it to generate its own, according to either the dominant lines of the musical texture or the more assertive personalities within the ensemble's social structure. Even with the most experienced ensembles, this leadership vacuum results in an aimlessness and lethargy that prevent the music from coming fully alive.

A second kind of conductor/ensemble interaction can be likened to a jailer leading a convict to prison. While the handcuffs and brute force give the jailer control appropriate to the situation, the person being arrested is not likely to be responsive to creative inspiration. Likewise, an ensemble's response to the jailer-conductor is either a begrudging, unmusical acquiescence or a willful, disharmonious rebellion. The creative energy of the ensemble's individual members is suppressed and contorted rather than harnessed and released.

A healthy alternative to these two approaches can be found in the analogy of a charioteer driving a team of horses. The horses are given the illusion that they have free rein to run at will, not because they are running out of control but for quite the opposite reason: they know that their master will assert only the amount of control necessary, and at just the right moment, to prepare the horses for any change in course.

A Hierarchy of Ensemble Needs

Achieving this ideal involves establishing a dynamic interaction between conductor and ensemble that addresses a hierarchy

Thomas Lloyd is Acting Director of Choirs and Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at Hamilton College, Clinton, New York.

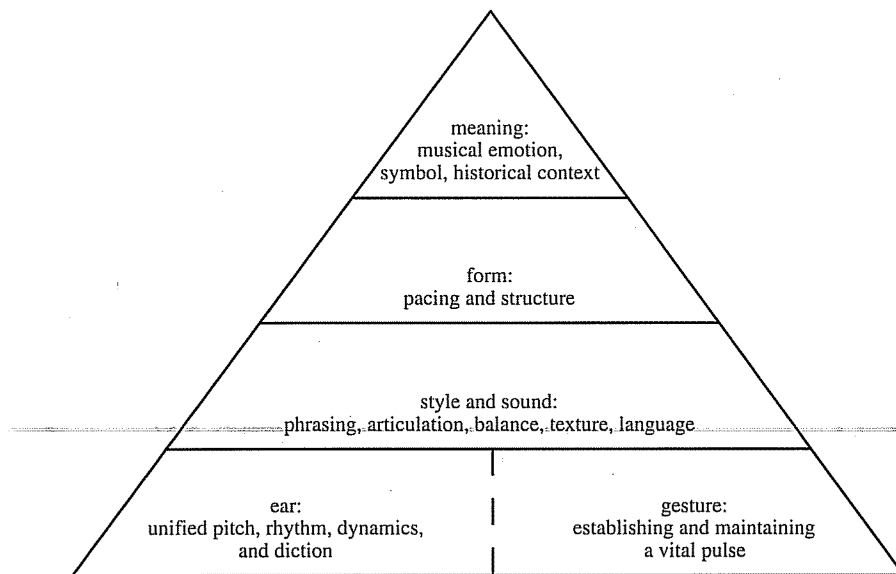

Figure 1. A pyramid of ensemble needs

of ensemble needs through the conductor's listening skills and physical gestures. The hierarchy is modeled on Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Human Needs," which addresses the realization of the human personality's full creative maturity.[1] Maslow's hierarchy takes the form of a pyramid, with the physical necessities of food, water, and clothing as the base. The higher steps of the pyramid are occupied by the need for physical safety and protection; the feeling of belonging to a group (such as an orchestra or chorus); the need for loving, individual relationships; and, finally, creative self-actualization in a democratic society. Maslow maintains that the more elevated and personally fulfilling needs cannot be satisfied if one of the more fundamental needs has not been met. If people are suffering from acute hunger, their available energies are so intensely focused on finding food that they have no energy left to pursue personal relationships or even personal safety.

In much the same way, a pyramid can be constructed to prioritize what ensembles need from conductors in order to become fully engaged musically (Figure 1). The "food, water, and clothing" that a choral ensemble needs before it can make music are a breathing, vibrant pulse and unified pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and diction. If a conductor meets these basic ensemble needs through his or her gestures and finely tuned ear, the musicians will develop independence without needing the conductor to dictate every musical nuance. If these needs are not met, the ensemble cannot move to more satisfying levels of music-making. While these two areas of conducting technique must be described separately at the lowest level of the pyramid, they tend to merge at the higher levels. As in Maslow's model, the different levels operate simultaneously. The conductor's task, however, is to avoid undercutting his or her attempts to meet the higher needs of musical expression through neglect of the fundamentals of good ensemble.

The Conductor's Listening Skills

The most basic task for the choral conductor's ear is the realization of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics, along with clarity of diction. It is all too tempting for a conductor to jump right into the more seductive aspects of musical expression and interpretation before attending to the nitty-gritty work of getting the notes right. Nothing erodes the conductor's authority more in the eyes of an ensemble than the perceived inability of a conductor to hear or correct basic errors of pitch, rhythm, or pronunciation. While standard ear training courses are a necessary prerequisite for a conductor, they cannot substitute for the experience of identifying

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discrepancies in the complex acoustical environment of an ensemble rehearsal. In rehearsal an inverse relationship develops between the amount of physical energy expended on conducting gestures and the amount of musical errors that go unnoticed by the ears. While over-conducting should always be avoided, it should be discouraged especially in the early stages of teaching a new piece. After the second reading of a musical passage, the conductor must not move ahead in rehearsal without correcting wrong notes or rhythms. The conductor must be able to clearly distinguish the ideal sound of the music in his or her inner ear from the actual sound of the ensemble. A cassette tape recorder, while imperfect in many ways, can be an excellent self-training tool in giving a conductor a second chance at comparing these two distinct sound images. Use of the video camera as a teaching aide in conducting laboratory classes should not blind conductors to the fact that ears are at least as important as arms.

As they move up the pyramid of ensemble needs, conductors should be more selective with rehearsal corrections, allowing the musicians more rein. The conductor should avoid the jailer-conductor's compulsion to fix everything, one passage after the next, thereby risking tediousness. Instead, the conductor should choose passages to rehearse that embody key principles of style and articulation that can be applied to other sections of a work. The conductor's challenge is to find the most clear and efficient way to communicate the desired improvements by verbalization, demonstration, and isolation of the elements that need correction. The process of listening and giving verbal feedback must be repeated until a change is achieved that is noticeable to both the conductor and ensemble, thereby giving validity to the communication between conductor and ensemble. Making verbal corrections without audible results causes the ensemble to be less responsive to the conductor's leadership. The conductor must prove to the ensemble that he or she really hears the music they are making and can hear distinct improvements after suggesting changes.

The higher needs of an ensemble in the areas of form, pacing, structure, and, ultimately, musical meaning are best communicated through nonverbal means. Certainly, the more educational the orientation of the ensemble the more appropriate it becomes to talk more extensively about form and meaning in rehearsal. This is especially true in vocal music where text and poetic or dramatic interpretation must be discussed by the conductor with any ensemble. However, even in educational settings, students learn more about music from what conductors do than what they say.

The Kinetic Connection with an Ensemble

The kinetic connection with an ensemble through breath, gesture, and eye contact is of equal importance to connecting with an ensemble by ear. The most essential element of gesture is the ability of a conductor to set the musical pulse. Setting the pulse means more than choosing the right tempo and keeping strict time. The conductor needs to be so clear in setting the pulse at the beginning of a new section that the ensemble feels free to go on its own by the middle of the first phrase. The emphasis in the conductor's gestures can then move on to the higher levels of articulation, phrasing, and form. When an ensemble has to refer to the conductor constantly for the basic pulse (as demanded by the jailer-conductor), the resultant pushing and pulling makes natural phrasing an impossibility. If the ensemble resists taking the conductor's initial pulse, it is better to stop and insist that the pulse be followed than to attempt to dictate every beat.

Often the conductor's gestural technique itself is the real problem. It is much easier to teach conductors how to beat a four pattern or a six pattern than it is to teach them how to physically convey a breathing pulse, regardless of the pattern. Classes in eurythmics can be very helpful in finding the connection between movement and music. Such classes reinforce the idea that, in conducting, pulse is initiated by breath and maintained through buoyancy of gesture.[2]

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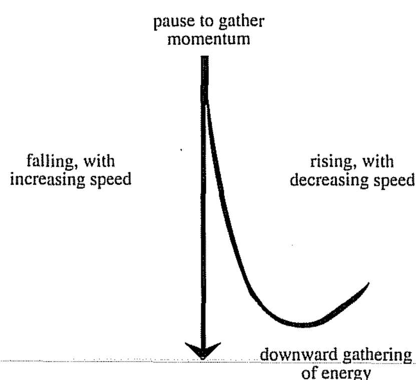

Figure 2. The upbeat gesture

The upbeat is the most important gesture in setting pulse. In most cases (except in very fast tempos), a one-beat preparation should be sufficient to set the tempo, which then is confirmed in the opening measures of the first phrase. After this point, maintenance of the pulse should require only minimal gestural attention until a tempo change occurs in the score. The nature of the upbeat gesture should correspond to the nature of the human breath when singing or playing a wind instrument or the bow-arm of a string player preparing for a down-bow. This means that the upbeat motion will not be of even speed. Beginning with a downward gathering of energy, the gesture then moves upward with decreasing speed to a moment of pause, where it gathers momentum before the hand drops with increasing speed to the downbeat (Figure 2). This slowing down and speeding up of the upbeat gesture parallels the naturally uneven speed of the human breath. The basic pulsing motion of the arm should be related to gravity in the same manner as the falling and follow-through of a clock pendulum. The pendulum motion is the most natural way of maintaining the pulse after the upbeat, more assertively at first until the pulse is steady and well established, and then with a lighter touch, like that of the charioteer.

In conducting, gesture preparation is all important. If the conductor does not grab the attention of the ensemble with a breathing upbeat that initiates the basic pulse of the music, the players or singers will be less likely to look up for further information and will feel less secure in playing or singing their parts. Furthermore, every important entrance and phrase beginning should receive the same sort of breathing upbeat along with the eye contact of the conductor. A cue given with both eye contact and breath receives a much stronger response. Making eye contact can be difficult at times, especially in a complex arrangement like an opera orchestra pit, but it is often more important than the size or direction of the cue gesture itself.

The Top of the Pyramid

Only when the conductor has some command over setting and maintaining the pulse of the ensemble can gestures related to the ensemble's higher needs of clear articulation, phrasing, and dynamics come across to the ensemble with the desired clarity and effect. The left hand then becomes free to shape the line of a phrase over the bar lines and emphasize points of textural contrast and articulation. By minimizing the size of its patterned gesture, the right hand can direct points of important dynamic change and phrase movement through the slightest enlargement of beat size. In the pacing of a large musical form, the control of pulse and a clear hierarchy of gestural size and emphasis are crucial.

Through constantly refining the conductor's listening skills and gestural language, the broader range of musical meaning represented at the top of the pyramid can be effectively communicated. The conductor's question, "Am I being followed," recedes in importance as both conductor and ensemble enjoy the expressive freedom that grows from the realization of their musical connection.

NOTES

[1] Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968).

[2] For more background on eurythmics and its application to conductor training, see Claire W. McCoy, "Eurythmics: Enhancing the Music-Body-Mind Connection in Conductor Training," *Choral Journal* 35 (December 1994): 21–28.

—CJ—

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